

# A Story of Compassion

## USDA Faith-Based and Community Initiatives

### Our Lady of Fatima II

Biloxi, Mississippi

Don R. Wilbanks lived through summer and fall as a homeless man in Biloxi, Mississippi. In January 2005 with winter fast approaching, he was still hungry and didn't have a job or a place to call home. Although he had a Bachelor of Science degree in Art Education and taught high school several years earlier, Wilbanks could not find work in his field or in any other area.

After five or six months without the basic needs, Don discovered Our Lady of Fatima Church Food Pantry. "They gave me the food I needed, and I wasn't hungry anymore," Don said. He was able to receive food provided through TEFAP, a program of USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. "Food packages are tailored to fit each

particular family and individual who comes in," said Mary Francis Ford. She explained

that because each person's needs are different, food packages are prepared based on the size of the household and their ability to get food.

The food pantry provided Don with a place to live and supplied him with blankets and clothing plus the opportunity to take a shower, wash his clothes, and use their telephone and post office box as an address when he applied for jobs, housing, or other necessities. Soon Don began volunteering at the food pantry doing whatever was needed and helping any way he could.



Then his luck was about to change! Don said he was working at the food pantry but still didn't have a job when one day a man came in to make a food donation. "He asked me if I was interested in employment. The man and his wife own a Japanese restaurant in Biloxi," Don continued. "When I said yes I was interested, he hired me to work at his restaurant as a maintenance person."

The man that hired Don also owns a motel in Biloxi. Don was allowed to move into the motel at no cost. "This is even better. I have a place to live and I work there on weekends as a desk clerk when I'm not helping out at the food bank," he said.

Don is doing much better now. He is very sincere when he says he feels that his life has truly been changed and enhanced for the better. "Without the food from USDA and the help of Our Lady of Fatima Food Pantry, I couldn't have made it!" Don said earnestly.

What happened with Don R. Wilbanks is truly a story about "lives transformed". It is a "success story" for the Mississippi Department of Human Services, Our Lady of Fatima Church Food Pantry, and especially for USDA's Food and Nutrition Service whose mission is to provide children and low-income families access to food and a healthful diet.

### How the Initiative is Helping

Mary Francis Ford elaborated on that. "Through USDA's Faith-based and Community Initiative," she said, "food pantries like ours are able to participate in



the TEFAP program the same as other organizations.”

After hearing about the faith-based and community initiative (FBCI) through the Food and Nutrition



Service, Our Lady of Fatima Food Pantry got in touch with the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) to find out how they could feed all of these families, children, and homeless individuals that came into their facility every day.

They spoke with MDHS TEFAP Administrator Jane Smith and found out they were eligible to receive commodities through TEFAP, a program of the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service.

Through USDA's Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church Food Pantry in Biloxi, Mississippi is able to meet the needs of a diverse group of people in their community.

## About the Organization

As a member of the Twelve Baskets Food Bank network, Our Lady of Fatima Church Food Pantry uses USDA and surplus foods to serve approximately 10,320 individuals each month. Through the TEFAP program, each family and individual receives the food they need to prepare a nutritious meal for themselves and their families.

This includes the many disabled and homeless veterans living in fields or under bridges and overpasses in not only the Biloxi area, but also in several other areas of Harrison County.

“We are the only emergency assistance program in West Biloxi,” she continued. This area is considered a ‘no man’s land’ – there are no soup kitchens between downtown Gulfport and downtown Biloxi. That’s why we decided to begin a food pantry here at Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church.”

Not only do clients get the food they so desperately need, but telephones and a post office box are also provided for the homeless so they will have an address to use when applying and responding to job offers. Families and individuals can get their medications and correspondence this way as well. The food pantry is funded in part by the St. Vincent de Paul Society, which pays for their operational expenses.

According to TEFAP Administrator Jane Smith of the Mississippi Department of Human Services, “Our Lady of Fatima Food Pantry is so much more than a food ministry, and the people associated with it go the extra mile, more than most, to assist (those in need) in their area.”